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Barbie's Hold Over the French

Why hasn't Klaus Barbie, the notorious Nazi war criminal, been brought to trial by the French? Some of my intelligence sources doubt that he will be.

The reason is simple and scandalous. The "Butcher of Lyon" has acquired a new title: "The Man Who Knew Too Much." Barbie has hinted from the start that he could blow the whistle on a number of Frenchmen—living and dead—who attained high positions in France after secretly collaborating with the Nazi occupation forces during World War II.

And the sad truth, I'm told, is that the deeper French investigators have dug into Barbie's grisly past, the more they've become convinced that his threats are not idle boasts.

The list of targets Barbie and his defense attorney have promised to expose as closet collaborators reportedly covers the political spectrum from far left to far right.

When Barbie was extradited from Bolivia early last year, the French raised howls of outrage over disclosures that U.S. Army counterintelligence officers had helped Barbie escape France after the war. The Justice Department investigated, confirmed the charges and issued an official apology to the people of France.

But the French press, so quick to point the finger of shame at the United States, has become strangely quiet about the Barbie case. In a country where virtually all the major publications are identifiably loyal to one political party or another, this suggests that Barbie is believed capable of embarrassing every political group in France, from

Gaullists to Socialists and Communists. President Francois Mitterrand's Socialist government at first was eager for a public trial of Barbie, believing that he would embarrass only its political rivals. Now they're not so sure.

My associate Lucette Lagnado was told by some of the Americans who "ran" Barbie as an intelligence informant that he often boasted of the ease with which he had recruited French spies for the Nazis. He even bragged that he had agents inside the resistance movement.

Barbie's lawyer has hinted that some of the clandestine traitors his client knows about rose to prominence in postwar France. But it would be easy to bluff. Even high officials who know they are clean can't be sure that one of their colleagues wasn't a hireling of Barbie during the occupation. It's not a secret likely to be shared.

So Barbie sits in jail while the government ostensibly takes more time to prepare the prosecution case. The trial, at first scheduled for late 1983, then for sometime this year, is now vaguely planned for 1985.

Some State Department sources suspect the French are stalling in hopes that Barbie, now 71 and reportedly in frail health, will do them the favor of dying before he can start telling what he claims to know in open court.

Footnote: Beate Klarsfeld, the international Nazi hunter who tracked Barbie down, disagreed strongly with the view that French authorities are delaying Barbie's trial out of fear of his revelations. "He has no names to reveal," she said. Klarsfeld said the trial would take place next year.